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WASHINGTON JOURNAL By Phil Tajitsu Nash

Politics is Life and Vice Versa

Near the end of *The Making of Asian America Through Political Participation* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2001), Professor Pei-te Lien reminds us, "Asian Americans have not been docile victims of racial discrimination, but dogmatic actors and resisters, too."

As we reflect on the results of the 2000 election cycle and gear up for 2002, this book is a healthy reminder of where we have been and where we can go if we as a community play our cards right. While much of what Professor Lien says has been said before, she pulls together history, current polls and just enough theory to keep your eyes racing through 245 pages of text. She argues convincingly that participation in the political realm — broadly defined to include litigation, community protests and legislative reforms, as well as electoral politics — has been a determining factor in the development of an Asian Pacific American identity. And her analyses of coalition-building and how coalitions can assist APAs as they strive for more political power are a valuable contribution to the literature.

Professor Lien is a scholar-activist who helped to found the Asian Pacific American Caucus of the American Political Science Association, and who teaches ethnic studies and politics at the University of Utah. She has been a leader in APA voting behavior analysis, and has played an especially valuable role by keeping APA women's concerns in the forefront of political theory and research. Through research funded by major Ford Foundation and National Science Foundation grants, she is helping to move

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the study of APA voter behaviors and attitudes from the realm of anecdote and small-scale exit polls to the realm of statistically-significant population samples.

While this book lacks the colorful first-hand accounts of activist-scholars such as Angelo Ancheta, Frank Wu or Helen Zia, the story of how the APA community came to political consciousness is told with care and great attention to footnoted detail. Indeed, with 11 pages of notes, 25 pages of resources and a 15 page appendix summarizing prior APA political behavior surveys, this is a wonderful place for researchers and historians to start further investigations into APA voter behavior and political empowerment.

Another of Professor Lien's strengths is her stark reminder to our community's political leaders that part of their job is to help the APA community gain parity in political representation and power. "Applying the logic of proportional representation," she says, "Asians should have participated in the governing of the American democracy at the rate of 3.1 percent in 1992 and 3.7 percent in 1998 ... [Yet] the 1.3 percent percentage of representation is the lowest of all racial groups."

"Besides under-representation," she continues, "another potential issue for the community is asymmetrical representation. As of 1999, of the six congresspersons ever elected from the United States mainland, only one was not from California [David Wu of Oregon] ... Japanese Americans comprised only 12 percent of the national API population in 1990, but three of the five voting members in the 106th Congress are Japanese and one is also the only woman legislator in the Asian delegation. Their ability to speak for the multiethnic community may be limited by the skewed geographical, ethnic, partisan and ideological distribution of the Capitol Hill team. Yet, their records of service suggest that this concern may be mitigated by the pan-ethnic nature of their representation."

While Congressman Wu, Congressman Mike Honda and the other members of the congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus have been exemplary at standing up to racism in Congress, informed observers such as Professor Lien make sure that all of us — whether inside or outside the halls of power — remember to keep our eyes on the ultimate prize of greater parity in the proportion of APAs, women, and other underrepresented groups on every level of government.

Professor Lien gives us reason for hope about the future of coalitions despite the mixed success of recent attempts by APAs to form coalitions with others in the political realm. "Asians were placed structurally in a precarious middle position," she says.

Paradoxically called both the “foreigner within” and the “model minority,” Asians as the middleman minority, like other minority groups, have often been used as a pawn in U.S. power politics. Their opportunities to form broad-based and lasting coalitions with other racial groups have been deterred by a structural condition that encourages racial mistrust, competition and conflict, and limited accommodation for non-whites.

Many who have been involved in APA political endeavors over the years would agree with Professor Lien that APA identity is contingent on many factors, and meaningful only in relation to other social phenomena and the larger political context. With the assistance of Professor Lien and her generation of historically-cognizant quantifiers, the doors to political awareness and empowerment for APAs will hopefully be opened even wider than they are now, and the perpetual outsider stereotype will hopefully become a vestige of the past.

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